

Lesson 5: Count and noncount nouns

Let's take a closer look at the noun *hand*. Notice that you can say the following:

the hand a hand hands

Here are some other nouns which demonstrate the same pattern:

| | | |
|------------|----------|---------|
| the store | a store | stores |
| the idea | an idea | ideas |
| the tissue | a tissue | tissues |

Let's compare *hand* to the noun *furniture*. As with *hand*, we can say *the furniture*. But we can't say **a furniture* or **furnitures*. Here are some other nouns which demonstrate the same pattern as *furniture*:

| | | |
|-------------|------------|------------|
| the dust | *a dust | *dusts |
| the energy | *an energy | *energies |
| the biology | *a biology | *biologies |

Thus, there are some nouns that can be counted, and so we can use *a* or *an* with them and can also make them plural. These nouns are called, appropriately, **count** nouns. *Hand* is a count noun. So are *store*, *idea*, and *tissue*.

There are other nouns that typically are not counted, and so we do not use *a* or *an* with them and do not typically make them plural. These nouns are called, also appropriately, **noncount** nouns. (Another name for a noncount noun is a **mass** noun.) *Furniture* is a noncount noun. So are *dust*, *energy*, and *biology*.

You may well be saying to yourself, "Wait a minute. I can count furniture. I can say something like: three couches and three chairs make six pieces of furniture." And of course, you'd be right. But notice that in this sentence, the words *couch* and *chair* can be made plural, but not the word *furniture*. And the word *piece* can be made plural, but, again, not the word *furniture*.

Quick tip 5.1

If you can pluralize a noun in a sentence, it is functioning as a count noun.

Note that a noun is considered to be a count noun if it can be made plural, even if it's not plural in a particular sentence. Thus, in the sentence *I ate a cookie*, *cookie* is a count noun because one could pluralize it to *cookies* without changing its basic meaning.

Test yourself 5.1

For each underlined noun in the sentences below, indicate if it is count (C) or noncount (NC). Use the plural test to help you.

Sample: Her hairstyle (C) clearly revealed her face.

Getting started (answers on p. 22)

1. The lights () of the city () twinkled.
2. I love eating rice ().
3. His anger () was barely under control.
4. Her job () was rather demanding.
5. Many types of information () are available at the library ().

More practice (answers on the website)

6. The police () will be here in a moment.
7. He leaned on the handle () and cursed.
8. I was so thirsty, I needed three glasses () of water ().
9. How much money () do you make in an hour ()?
10. By 11 p.m., the train-station () was nearly empty.

There is also another good way to decide if a noun is count or noncount. Take a look at the use of the words *much* and *many* in the following sentences.

1. He has many children.
2. That man has many interests.
3. That will take too much time.
4. They have many lights on in the house.
5. We have much furniture in our store.
6. I wonder how much wealth is in Silicon Valley.

As you may have noticed, *many* is used with count nouns, *much* is used with noncount nouns.

Quick tip 5.2

If you can use *many* with a noun (when it is pluralized), it's a count noun. If you can use *much* with a noun, it's a noncount noun.

And we have still another way to distinguish count from noncount nouns:

7. He has fewer children than I do.
8. That man has fewer interests than he used to.
9. That will take less time than I thought.
10. They have fewer lights on in the house.
11. We have less furniture in our store.
12. I don't have less money in my purse than you have.

As you've probably figured out from these examples, we use *fewer* with count nouns and *less* with noncount nouns.

Quick tip 5.3

If you can use *fewer* with a noun (when it is pluralized), it's a count noun. If you can use *less* with a noun, it's a noncount noun.

Test yourself 5.2

For each underlined noun in the sentences below, indicate if it is being used as a count (C) or noncount (NC) noun in that sentence. Use the plural, *much/many*, or *fewer/less* tests to help you.
Sample: Their new album (C) was a huge hit.

Getting started (answers on p. 22)

1. Algebra () was one of my worst subjects () in high school ().
2. I had no idea that there were various theories (), such as Euclidean and fractal.
3. The smoke () rose through the chimney ().
4. Bread () is a staple in many societies ().
5. She decided to push the issue () further.

More practice (answers on the website)

6. People () are funny sometimes.
7. The government () of the United States has three branches ().
8. Senators () can spend money () unnecessarily.
9. It takes effort () to get a good grade () in Mr. Goodman's class ().
10. The reporters () wrote the story ().

To enhance your understanding

Many nouns can be used as either count nouns or as noncount nouns, depending on how they are being used in a specific sentence. Let's look at the following sentence containing the word *sugar*:

13. The *sugar* is spilling onto the floor.

In this sentence, is *sugar* being used as a count or noncount noun? Would you say: *The sugars are spilling onto the floor?* or *Many sugars are spilling onto the floor?* Probably not. So *sugar*, in sentence 13, is a noncount noun.

Now take a look at another sentence with *sugar*:

14. This gourmet shop has *sugars* I've never even heard of.

In this sentence, is *sugar* being used as a count or noncount noun? First, notice that *sugar* here is pluralized. Second, notice that you can say *This gourmet shop has many sugars I've never even heard of.* So *sugar*, in sentence 14, is a count noun. In terms of meaning, what is important here is that the sentence is talking about different types of sugars, say, brown sugar, white sugar, confectioners' sugar, etc.

And one more sentence type with *sugar*:

15. The *sugar* that works best in this recipe is brown sugar.

Here, *sugar*, while not pluralized, could be pluralized and refers, in fact, to a kind of sugar. For example, you could say: *The sugars that work best in this recipe are brown sugar and white sugar.* For these reasons, *sugar* is being used here as a count noun.

Here are some more examples of sentences with nouns which, like *sugar*, are typically used as noncount nouns but can also be used as count nouns.

- 16a. I like to drink milk. (*milk* used as noncount noun)

- 16b. That store has milks with different kinds of flavoring: chocolate, vanilla, mocha, and strawberry. (*milks* used as count noun)

- 16c. The milk that is the healthiest is nonfat milk. (*milk* used as count noun)
- 17a. A plentiful supply of water is important for a community's survival. (*water* used as noncount noun)
- 17b. There are different kinds of gourmet waters on the market these days. (*waters* used as count noun)
- 17c. The water I usually order in restaurants is imported. (*water* used as count noun)